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Artisanal Coffeehouses as Potential Prototype for Community Hearth

Summary:

The University of Oregon winter 2008 terminal studio to be conducted by professor D. Genasci, addresses potential development of the Conway (Consolidated Truck Lines) property in northwest Portland, Oregon. The area has significant industrial history and context. For this studio, I propose to integrate two types of occupancy: an industrial component and a community hearth component.

With regard to the community hearth aspect, can artisanal coffeehouses, especially those in Portland, serve as prototypes. This brief study gathers information from owners, employees, and observers in order to shed some light on this possibility. Further research is warranted, especially with respect to the similarity or differences between the concept of community hearth and the concept of the “third place.”

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With regard to the industrial component, occupancy may be comprised of more than one artisanal process of food production from agricultural products. For example, artisanal coffeehouses often have an associated roasting operation. Additionally, artisanal chocolate production and artisanal distilling have similar or parallel requirements.

A retail cafe setting, whether a community hearth or third place, offering artisanal coffee, chocolate, and distilled beverages from adjacent production, may expand retail occupancy with offerings well suited to both daytime and evening patronage.



Coffeehouse (10)

Both Frank Lloyd Wright and Gottfried Semper made observations relevant to the question of what a community hearth might be:

“The hearth is the psychological center of the home.”⁸
~Frank Lloyd Wright

*“Around the hearth the first groups assembled;
around it the first alliances formed;
around it the first rude religious
concepts were put into the customs...”⁵*
~Gottfried Semper

To research the concept of community hearth, questions were prepared in order to seek responses from roasters, baristas, owners, and patrons of coffeehouses:

1. Is the hearth the psychological center or soul of the home?
2. Do you see a community hearth which functions in a similar way?
3. What types of images or feelings are associated with the idea of “hearth” for you?
4. What would be the essential elements for a community hearth to function?
5. Do or can Portland artisanal coffeehouses function as community hearths?
6. How do you see the importance of the social environment of a coffeehouse?

In practice, these questions functioned more to facilitate and guide course of the interviews and conversations which were had. Summarizing the conversations:^{1,3,4,6}

1. Generally yes; if the hearth is not strong enough a kitchen or woodstove seems to function as hearth. All of these can be related to light, warmth, and nourishment.
2. If there is a community hearth, it is where people gather and can experience relatedness, warmth, and nourishment.
3. Warmth, light, safety, soft light, nourishment, comfort, family, people, activity noise, connection.
4. Activity noise, people talking and working, smells, food / drink, friends or social interaction.
5. Generally, yes.
6. Basically, social involvement is necessary; the social environment can take precedence with coffee and foods being relegated to context or backdrop.

Reviewing the conversations, it appears the artisanal Portland coffeehouse can serve as a prototype for a community hearth. It appears, the social aspect of good coffeehouses are not separable from the function of the coffeehouse. The question of whether the idea of a “third place” equates with “community hearth” arose.



Third Place (2)

Starbucks famously promoted itself as the “Third Place.”⁹ This idea was articulated by Ray Oldenburgh in his 1989 book “The Great, Good Place Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community.”¹² With regard to the third place:

“Starbucks envisions local outlets as a 'third place' [besides home and work] to spend time, and store design is intended to achieve this.”⁹

“Oldenburgh calls one's "first place" the home and those that one lives with. The "second place" is the workplace — where people may actually spend most of their time. Third places, then, are "anchors" of community life and facilitate and foster broader, more creative interaction. All societies already have informal meeting places; what is new in modern times is the intentionality of seeking them out as vital to current societal needs.”¹²

“The character of the third place is determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by its playful mood,” he [Oldenburgh] said. “It’s really the heart of a community’s social vitality.”¹¹

“The fact that people are no longer tied to specific places for functions such as studying or learning, says Mr Mitchell, means that there is “a huge drop in demand for traditional, private, enclosed spaces” such as offices or classrooms, and simultaneously “a huge rise in demand for semi-public spaces that can be informally appropriated to ad-hoc workspaces”. This shift, he thinks, amounts to the biggest change in architecture in this century.”⁷

The concepts of community hearth and third place appear congruent. This adds depth to further exploration of how to identity and describe the qualities of a prototype for the Conway property studio addressing northwest industrial Portland.

Further questions arose regarding which artisanal Portland coffeehouses there might be significant agreement on with regard to success or failure with regard to it's function as a community hearth / third place. This may serve to focus some of the relevant qualities to identify.

This preliminary investigation regarding opinions and observations related to the community hearth / third place allows more investigation to be had in a more comprehensive manner. It appears there is or can be a prototype which can be ascertained or posited for use in the upcoming studio project.



Coffee (11)

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